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ABSTRACT

An investigation of interrogative structures in French examined the extent to which variation in the structure of the questions was conditioned by their function. Data are drawn from a corpus containing 177 yes/no questions and 117 WH- questions. Findings suggest the following: (1) in identifying the communicative function of interrogatives, it is necessary to use concepts of discoursal/conversational function in addition to illocutionary forces; (2) in yes/no interrogatives, SV is the unmarked variant, ESV being used notably when no response is expected, and for politeness; and (3) in WH- interrogatives, linguistic and discoursal constraints appear to outweigh other pragmatic factors. By way of caution, it is noted that the simultaneous presence of many different factors indicates that it is not always clear what the principal factors motivating the speaker's choice of structure are on a particular occasion. (MSE)

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PRAGMATIC CONSTRAINTS ON INTERROGATIVES IN SPOKEN FRENCH*

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Introduction

It is well known that interrogative structures serve to fulfil a wide range of communicative functions, in addition to that of requests for information, which is probably their prototypical function. To what extent are the different structures in French used for complementary functions? Or, put the other way round, to what extent is the variation in structures conditioned by function? These questions will be addressed here with reference to a corpus of spoken French (for details, see Coveney (forthcoming)), in which a total of 177 Yes/No interrogatives and 117 WH-interrogatives were identified[1].

The interrogative structures which occur in the corpus are exemplified below, together with a formulaic representation of the structures:

(1) [SV] vous voulez la tisane?
(2) [ESV] est-ce que c'est bon aussi?
(3) [V-CL] Voulez-vous la tisane?
(4) [QSV] comment elles s'appellent?
(5) [QESV] qu'est-ce qu'il faut?
(6) [SVQ] on en était où là?
(7) [QV-CL] où allons-nous?
(8) [QV NP] en quoi consiste votre enquête?
(9) [QØV] qui y a été?

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(key: S = subject clitic or Noun Phrase; CL = subject clitic; NP = subject Noun Phrase; V = verb; E = est-ce que/qui; Q = WH- word or phrase; Ø = empty subject position).

Communicative Function

As a starting point in the examination of communicative function, it was decided to attempt to code each interrogative utterance for its illocutionary force. This was done for two reasons: firstly, because recent cross-linguistic research has demonstrated that the speaker's choice of interrogative structure in many languages is motivated by the illocutionary force intended by the speaker (cf Chisholm (1984); Sadock & Zwicky (1985)); and secondly, because it is well known that certain categorical constraints on French interrogatives are determined by the illocutionary force of the utterance. For example, in a request for action, with a finite verb in the present tense, the [SV] structure must be used (unless the verb is pouvoir, vouloir, or aller): both the [ESV] and [V-CL] structures being unacceptable:

(10) tu coupes un petit peu? (J2/130)
(11) *Est-ce que tu coupes un petit peu?
(12) *Coupes-tu un petit peu?

(11 and 12 would of course, be acceptable as requests for information.)

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Speech act theory (including the concept of illocutionary force) has come in for severe criticism since it was first developed by Austin (1962) and Searle (1969). For example Levinson (1985:285) states that '.... the conversational dependence of illocutionary force is such that the concept itself may be claimed to be substantially replaced by concepts of conversational function ...'. He later argues that '...intuitive use of categories like request should in fact be backed up by at least (i) a full sequential explication in terms of the range of expectable responses (like refusals, deferrals, compliances, etc.) and (ii) an account of the way that requests are typically formulated in order to obtain the desired responses...' (p. 368). But the expectable responses do not always occur, and moreover it is well known that different speech acts can be performed by means of linguistically identical utterances. Therefore the analyst will, at least occasionallly, need to rely on their intuitive understanding of categories such as offer etc. In such cases felicity conditions provide an explicit definition of the illocutionary force, and it should be recognised that they form one set of the defining properties of speech acts.

It has been found in this study that more categories and finer distinctions of illocutionary force are required than has generally been recognised in order to handle the interrogatives occurring in a corpus of natural spoken language: for example, rather than a single illocutionary force of 'questioning', several different sub-categories of 'requesting' are needed (cf. Martins-Baltar (1976) and St Pierre (1977). In other cases two discoursal parameters (quoted and self-addressed utterances) will be employed to modify a traditional speech act category. It should be pointed out that the discoursal modifiers may reflect the fact that the utterance does not have the same force (and hence felicity conditions) as the unmodified speech act. For example in a quoted request for information, the speaker does not actually want to know the information. However, it is useful to indicate the speech act originally intended by the person being quoted, as in some cases the linguistic form of the quoted interrogative is still determined by this.

Although the categories of communicative function (CF) employed in this study will be derived basically from those of illocutionary force, this does not imply a dismissal of the importance of conversational structure. On the contrary, this, together with intonation and other contextual factors provides crucial clues for the hearer and the analyst in identifying the CF intended by the speaker. Nor is it denied that utterances have one or more conversational/discoursal function(s) additionally. There is indeed reason to believe that conversational function exerts a significant influ- ence on the speaker's choice of interrogative in French. Furthermore, certain utterances seem to have no illocutionary force, but a very clear conversational function, and in these cases it is this which will provide the utterance's CF category, eg a 'pre-announcement'.

It will be clear by now that the CF categories used in this study are rather eclectic. However, in order that any interconnections between CFs and the interrogative structures should be perceived more easily, the CFs have been placed in the following broad CF groupings:

(i) Speaker expects addressee/hearer to respond: eg request for information, 'biased' request for information, request for action, offer, greeting.

(ii) Speaker expects him/herself to respond (speaker apparently does not know the answer at the time of utterance): eg self-addressed request for information.

(iii) No response expected (or speaker already knows at the time of utterance the response s/he will give): eg quoted question, rhetorical question, echo filler, 'sub-topic introducing question', pre-announcement, post-announcement.

Yes/No Interrogatives

The number of tokens of Yes/No interrogatives for the three communicative function (CF) groupings is shown in Table 1, together with the percentage of [SV] and [ESV] tokens in each grouping.

TABLE 1

CF Grouping	N	[SV]	[ESV]
H to respond	126	96.8%	3.2%
S to respond	4	75%	25%
No response (or answer known)	47	34%	66%
Total	177		

Clearly in this corpus when a response is expected from the addressee, the [SV] structure (usually with final rising intonation[2]) is overwhelmingly preferred: the small number of cases in which [ESV] is used will be discussed below. Using my own (non-native) intutitions to make acceptability judgements on potential utterances with the alternative structures, 48 categorical tokens were identified. In almost all these cases it is the CF of the utterance (rather than a linguistic contraint) which renders the alternative structures unacceptable. The only categorical [ESV] token is shown underlined in (13): its CF is that of an 'echo filler':

(13) B: ....euh *quand* - [ENTER S]
S: *Bertrand* est-ce que je peux avoir des agraffes et de la colle?/
B: est-ce que tu peux avoir des agraffes et de la colle?/
S: s'il te plaît./ (C/174)

Of the 47 categorical [SV] interrogatives, 38 are 'biased' requests for information, clarification, etc. in the sense that the speaker expects a particular response, whether positive or negative, as in (14), (15), and (16):

(14) D: ... et vous n'avez toujours pas d - n'avez pas de colos qui marchent chez vous?/
A: non non/ (D/694)

(15) A: ... ça veut dire quoi conseiller prud'homme?/
E: conseiller prud'homme? - tu sais pas ce que c'est que les conseils de prud'hommes?/ (E/668)

(16) K: ....alors/ y a pas c'est pas à onze heures du matin ou à?/
(pour le) repas hein./
A: ah non *quand même - fin*/ (K/931)

Of the remaining categorical [SV] interrogatives, two are requests for action, and one (17) is a quoted request for action:

(17) O: .... par exemple y a une petite fille qui me dit 'ah j'ai/ je me frotte les - les noeuils euh tu me mets de de la couleur sur les noeuils?'.... (O/317)

Notice that in this case the CF of the original utterance (a request for action) still constrains the structure used, even though the quotation could be seen as part of a larger utterance with the CF of 'assertion'.

As will be apparent from Table 1, [SV] is very much the 'unmarked' variant of the (YNQ) variable, and [ESV] the 'marked' variant, with [V-CL] being non-existent. What factors motivate a speaker to use the marked [ESV] structure? Söll (1982:47) found that, in children's speech [ESV] interrogatives were generally found at the beginning of a 'conversational unit' or introduced a new topic. Grundström (1973:25), among others, has reported that [ESV] rather than [SV] tends to be used in lengthy questions so that the speaker can signal straight away that the utterance is a question. It has also been suggested (eg by Vigner (1978:88) that est-ce que is a marker of politeness. All three of these explanations receive some further support when we examine the CFs of the 36 [ESV] questions in the data. Thirteen tokens have the illocutionary force of 'self-addressed requests for information/opinion' as in (18) and (19):

(18) P: ...culturellement on a eu une influence là-dessus./mais est-ce que c'est bien ou mal? je sais pas. (L/468)

(19) W: .../alors est-ce que ça sera toujours des maternels? euh (j'y suis pour rien quoi)/ (W/416)

However, they differ from ordinary requests for information, not only because they are self-addressed, but also in that the speaker clearly knows, at the time of uttering the question, the answer s/he is about to give. Conversationally, they are rather similar to what Comrie (1984:40) has called 'topic-introducing questions'. However, the tokens in (18) and (19), and the others, are not 'topic-introducing' but rather 'sub-topic introducing questions'[4]. Just four of the 36 [ESV] interrogatives are used for CFs which anticipate a response from the hearer/addressee. S's question in (13) above is an indirect request for action ('indirect' because it formally resembles a request for permission). Since S (female, aged 18) is interrupting B (male, aged 35, director of the camp) to ask him to give her some goods, this constitutes a relatively weighty face-threatening act

(in Brown and Levinson's (1978) terms) hence the indirectness of the request, and also the use of [ESV] rather than [SV]. Three other [ESV] tokens can be explained similarly, since they were requests for information made by two female informants who were socially rather distant from the male fieldworker. The 'heaviness' or length of the question seems to have motivated the choice of [ESV] in just a few cases, such as (20):

(20) W: ...est-ce qu'y a une v philosophie derrière le fait de dire ' euh les gamins ne remontent pas dans leurs chambres'?/ (W/438)

Far more significant however is the fact that quoted interrogatives tend to have the [ESV] structure: 15/23 non-categorical occurrences.

WH- interrogatives

The range of different CFs which WH- interrogatives fulfil is far more limited than in the case of Yes/No interrogatives, but the picture is complicated by the larger number of variant structures. The number of tokens for the three CF groupings is given in Table 2, with the percentage of the six variants for each grouping. (The seven categorical tokens are excluded here.)

TABLE 2

CF Groupings	N	[QSV]	[QESV]	[SVQ]	[QV-CL]	[QV NP]	[QØV]
H to respond	30	13.3%	43.3%	33.3%	3.3%	3.3%	3.3%
S to respond	34	35.3%	41.2%	14.7%	11.8%	-	-
No response (or answer known)	46	23.9%	52.2%	4.4%	6.5%	4.4%	6.5%
TOTAL	110						

We shall examine in turn the evidence for pragmatic constraints on [QV NP], [QESV], [QSV] and [SVQ]. ([QV-CL] and QØV] are both very infrequent in the corpus, and are, in any case, largely constrained by socio-stylistic and linguistic factors respectively.)

There are just three instances of [QV NP]: this is principally due to the fact that subject NPs generally are rather infrequent in the data (this being typical of continuous, uninterrupted discourse, especially in interviews, when new topics tend to be introduced by the interviewer, rather than the informant). Indeed, there are no other WH- questions in the corpus where [QV NP] could have been used. I am assuming here that right and left-dislocation of NPs which are coreferential with the subject clitic are motivated by other discoursal factors. Hence in (21)

(21) child: William/
W: oui/
child: (...) - Gérard il m'a donné une claque/
W: mm/ alors ça/ où il est Gérard?/ (W/559)

W used this structure because the entity, Gérard, was 'given' in the discourse. The right-dislocated NP is traditionally considered to be external to the clause, and does not have intonational prominence - unlike the NP in [QV NP]. One of the three instances of [QV NP] in the data is very nearly categorical: compare (22) with potential alternatives (23) and (24):

(22) G: ... où est l'inconvénient?..... (R2/565)
(23) * où l'inconvénient est?
(24) ? où l'inconvénient est-il?

The unacceptability of (23) and the doubtful status of (24) are probably both due to the principles of 'end-focus' and 'end-weight' (cf Leech (1983); Quirk et al. (1985)), according to which longer and more informative constituents tend to occupy the end-position in the clause. The monosegmental copula est is the lightweight constituent par excellence, and is probably always unacceptable finally with a subject NP. The use of [QV NP] therefore seems to be motivated by the presence of a subject NP which is 'new' in the discourse. In (25) and (26) this also represents the new topic or sub-topic, as is reflected by the presence of the discourse marker mais:

(25) B: ... et puis on discutera si/si nous aussi on a envie (qu'ils reviennnent) avec nous ou pas/ hein / mais - comment d'habitude se fait se faisait notre groupe? - eh bien - bon je te dis .... (C/1173)

(26) A: ... fin la fin d'août je compte aller en Lorraine un petit peu parce que j'ai des amis (qui habitent là-bas....)/
C: mais en quoi consiste votre enquête?/ (R/1142)

Turning now to [QESV], the pragmatic constraints are of much less significance than a linguistic one: the overwhelming majority of the occurrences (45/51, non-categorical) are with que as the WH- word, and this is largely because que (and its variant quoi) cannot occur in [QSV]. Of the six [QESV] tokens with a different WH- word three may have been motivated by pragmatic factors. (27), a request for information, was addressed by a 50 year-old female informant (hence vous again) to the 26-year old male fieldworker, and could therefore be regarded as a relatively weighty 'FTA', requiring the extra politeness marker of est-ce que:

(27) K: à quelle heure est-ce que vous mangez l'assiette anglaise?/ (K/939)

Two further examples, (28) and (29), were quoted from the telephone or written language, where [QESV] is more likely to be used. (28) was additionally, an indirect request for action:

(28) P: .... on téléphone on écrit en disant 'mais quand est-ce que vous venez nous inspecter? on veut vous voir' euh/ (L/780)

(29) W: ... ils m'ont téléphoné 'quand est-ce que vous pouvez venir?' ... (W/119)

However, there is no obvious pragmatic motivation for the choice of structure in the three other [QESV] questions with WH- words other than que, nor is length of utterance apparently a factor here.

The [QSV] structure, which is generally considered to be non-standard (cf Wagner & Pinchon (1962:542); Grevisse (1986:657)), is used in only four of the 30 WH- questions when a response is expected from the addressee/hearer (in one of these, the addressee was a child). However, it is used considerably more with the other two CF groupings (see Table 2). It may be that informants avoided it when addressing questions to the fieldworker because it is considered less polite, due to its non-standard status.

It is with the [SVQ] variant that we find some of the strongest discoursal constraints operating. In order to increase the number of examples of [SVQ], five questions from non-informants present will be added to the 17 variable tokens in the corpus. Inspecting these interrogatives, we find that:

(i) they are generally rather short, with very few adverbials or complements

(ii) the verbs are mostly of low informational value: 12/22 are être, others include (il) y a, avoir, faire, s'appeler, consister; three others (vouloir, s'en aller, arriver) are 'given' (ie 'evoked textually or situationally', in Prince's (1981) terms).

(iii) three of the subject pronouns are cases of 'ellipted' il, two are 'empty' ce/ça.

(iv) 7/22 of the WH- words are combien, which tends to collocate frequently with minimal subject + verb combinations such as c'est, ça fait, il y a.

In (30), (31), and (32) it can be seen that the underlined elements of the [SVQ] interrogatives are all 'textually evoked'. ((30) follows on immediately from (13) above).

(30) B: je crois que là y a une agrafeuse./ (combien . . . .) pas beaucoup y en a encore./
S: merci./
B: tu en veux combien, d'agrafes?/ (C/179)

(31) A: on a essayé notre association a essayé de faire des colos binationales (. . . .) enfin pendant quinze ans quand même/ moi j'en avais pas fait mais il paraît que ça marchait *relativement* bien
D: *(ils) marchaient bien?*/
A: et ils en ont fait en Angleterre en France un petit peu mais maintenant avec toutes les affaires la crise chez nous/ ils ont commencé à fermer des centres qu'on utilisait* (. . . .)*
D: *euh vous* faisiez ça dans quoi? dans des dans des écoles dans des?/ (D/706)

(32) X: est-ce qu'on peut sortir avec les trente-cinq gosses? - *(on est deux)*/
L: *vous êtes* combien?/ (J/280)

And in (33) the underlined elements are also given ('situationally evoked'):

(33) [LONG SILENCE]
R: mais vous êtes en France pour combien de temps?/

Clearly the given elements of the [SVQ] interrogatives in (30) - (33) are quite uninformative and the speaker in each case can presuppose quite certainly that the addressee knows what little information they do convey. It should be mentioned however, that the potential alternative utterances to (30) - (33) with the WH- elements in clause-initial position would not be unacceptable, even in the same context: the difference would seem to be that, the speaker would be presupposing the given information less strongly than in the [SVQ] utterances. If we consider now certain questions with the WH- element 'fronted', we shall see that the potential [SVQ] alternatives are somewhat anomalous in the discourse context. First, let us compare (34) and (35):

(34) B: qu'est ce que tu veux?/ [TO N LOOKING IN THROUGH WINDOW FROM OUTSIDE] (C/1284)

(35) Tu veux quoi?

Saying (35), B would presuppose strongly that N wanted something, whereas she had not given any indication of this. (Additionally we could note that (35) would be less polite than (34).) In (36),

(36) [INTERRUPTION]
D: bon qu'est-ce que tu m'avais demandé?/ (D/416)

(37) Tu m'avais demandé quoi?

D needed to remind her interlocutor that he had asked her a question, and therefore chose not to present this as given information, as would be the case in (37). Similarly, in (27) and (28) by using a 'WH- fronted ' structure, the speakers are weakly presupposing the information in the SV(C) part of the clause. If they had said (38) and (39) instead,

(38) Vous mangez l'assiette anglaise à quelle heure?

(39) Mais vous venez nous inspecter quand?

they would have been strongly presupposing the SV(C) information. This would have been quite inappropriate in the context of (27) since the addressee had not confirmed that the English do eat the assiette anglaise. Similarly, in the context of (28), in using the [SVQ] structure, the speaker would have seemed to be strongly (and inappropriately and impoliteley) presupposing that the addressee was indeed coming to inspect them. Another constraint operating on [SVQ] is that the structure cannot be used for rhetorical questions, like (40) and (41):

(40) K: ... oui mais alors où allons-nous? hein/ c'est là ou c'est la fin hein - des centres./ (K/762)

(41) K: ... y a pas d'ouvrages pour eux / qu'est-ce que vous voulez qu'ils fassent?/ et s tout est mécanisé euh/ (K/346)

The explanation for this may be as follows. [SVQ] puts the WH- element in the stressed 'focus' position and is, in a sense, the 'emphatic question' structure. Rhetorical questions, on the other hand, are 'non-questions', since no response is expected, and their illocutionary force is that of an emphatic assertion. Notice, however, that [SVQ] can be used in 'sub-topic introducing questions' (although other structures seem to be preferred):

(42) P: ... alors ça consiste en quoi? eh ben- ça consiste euh à animer / à animer un groupe d'animateurs c'est le cas de le dire (J/24)

Conclusion

We can summarise the main findings in this paper as follows:

(i) In identifying the communicative function of interrogatives, it was found necessary to employ concepts of discoursal/ conversational function in addition to illocutionary force.

(ii) In Yes/No interrogatives, [SV] is the unmarked variant, [ESV] being used notably when no response is expected, and for politeness.

(iii) In WH- interrogatives, linguistic and discoursal constraints appear to outweigh other pragmatic factors: specifically, [QV NP] is used when the NP is new; and [SVQ] is used when the SV(C) information is strongly presupposed by the speaker.

Finally, a word of caution is in order. The number of tokens is, in some cases, insufficient to provide strong evidence of some of the tendencies mentioned, and, moreover, the simultaneous presence of many different factors means that it is not always clear which are the principal factors motivating the speaker's choice of structure on a particular occasion.

NOTES

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1. This article deals in more detail with some of the areas hinted at in my paper at 'SS7', which was entitled 'Variation in interrogatives in spoken French' and was principally concerned with methodology.

2. Fónagy and Bérard (1973:95) found that 36.8% of their [SV] questions did not have a distinctively interrogative intonation, but were nevertheless recognised as questions because of the conversational context.

3. Terms to describe this type of question have proliferated: in addition to 'biased' (coined by Moravcsik (1971) according to Sadock & Zwicky (1985)) Leech (1983:166) uses 'loaded', Quirk et al (1985:808) prefer 'conducive', Wagner & Pinchon (1962:547) have 'dirigée', Fónagy and Bérard (1973) use 'implicative'.

4. In Conversation Analysis they might be termed 'pre-announcements', but I prefer to reserve this term for questions such as:

T: ...tu sais pourquoi il (ne l') a pas eu? parce qu'il avait oublié de mettre la ceinture./ (T/743)

But notice that, since T does not pause for the addressee to respond, his interrogative does not serve to check the newsworthiness of the subsequent announcement, which Levinson (1983:354) states as the function of pre-announcements.

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